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ABSTRACT

In 1868, Africatown was established in Mobile and Prichard, Alabama, by members of the last cargo of slaves brought to the United States. The community deserves recognition as a National Historic District because it is one of the few places in America where most residents can collectively trace their lineage to a group of pure Africans. In its earliest history, most of the Africatown men worked in the local lumber mills, and the women became fruit and vegetable vendors, cooks, or laundresses. These people were known as craftspeople, especially for woodworking and quilting. Africatown is also well known for its folk medicine, and most residents continue to rely on traditional African herbal drugs. Like most African music, the music in Africatown is chiefly vocal. The area is rich in folktales, many of which need to be recorded and documented. Another cultural area in particular need of preservation efforts is architecture. Many of Africatown's older shotgun houses and bungalows should be restored and preserved as monuments to the unsung craftsmen who erected them. Formal efforts to preserve Africatown began with the founding of the Progressive League in 1957, and in 1981 Africatown was nominated to become a National Historic District. In 1985, the Alabama legislature officially recognized Africatown as an historic area and made provisions for its establishment as a State park. (KH)

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Africatown, USA

Some Aspects of Folklife and Material Culture
of an Historic Landscape



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*"A people without the knowledge
of their past history, origin and
culture is like a tree without roots."*

Marcus Garvey

Africatown, U.S.A.

Some Aspects of Folklife and Material Culture of an Historic Landscape

by

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Introduction

The folklife and material culture of African-Americans, as well as those of other ethnic groups who lived unpretentiously in small neighborhoods, have not been given adequate attention. Greater efforts must be made to record the ways of life of African-American communities. The recent emergence of African-American preservation specialists is beginning to alter this trend and will help rectify the problem. As a result, the African-American preservation movement has experienced significant growth in the past few years with the formation of community-based preservation organizations throughout the country. As Kirsten Mullen pointed out, "Ironically, just as the Black community begins to develop expertise, practitioners and an interest in preservation, Federal support is disappearing." The funding of preservation efforts seems to be the most difficult task confronting African-American organizations. Also of paramount concern is the difficulty of gaining recognition and National Register listing for African-American cultural resources. They continue to be largely ignored by state and federal officials who are charged with protecting and enhancing such resources. Africatown, located in Mobile and Prichard, Alabama, is a classic example of this neglect.

This booklet will provide information on some aspects of the folklife and material culture of Africatown, and is intended to promote and encourage the preservation as well as the appreciation of African-American cultural resources and heritage. It offers information about the remnants of a way of life that must be preserved so that future generations can explore and better understand the culture of their ancestors.

The initial settlers of Africatown were directly linked to a significant historical episode in American history—the illegal slave trade. The landing of the *Clotilde*, the schooner used to transport the Africans to America, at Mobile in 1859 ended the American slave trade (Roche, 1936). The area deserves recognition because it is one of the few places in America where most residents can collectively trace their lineage to a group of pure Africans. As such, it has the potential to serve as a symbol of African-American heritage and also as an economic stimulus to the community if it is designated as a National/International Historic District.

As Carter G. Woodson noted in 1926, Plateau (Africatown), deserves special attention because "it is composed largely of Negroes who descended from the last cargo of slaves brought to this country. Most of these people, therefore, are just one or two generations removed from Africa." This is a unique situation in the United States and is significant because the descendants did not have to return to Africa in search of their "roots", nor were their African ancestors unknown to them, as were the ancestors of most African-Americans.

Preservation of the cultural and folk heritage of Africatown is imperative. It is but one of the many African-American communities ingrained with pride, history, and cultural resources. These cultural resources are also potential economic resources that could boost the quality of life and increase the cultural awareness of the African-American experience for both residents and visitors. They can also serve as sources of entertainment and provide jobs. Preservation planning and management is sorely needed in these communities to make the potentials become realities.

History of Africatown

In 1859, the schooner *Clotilde* sailed from Mobile to the coast of Africa to secure Africans for the illegal slave trade that was still underway despite Federal laws prohibiting import of Africans for slavery.

The schooner was captained by William Foster and the financier of the voyage was Timothy Meaher. In a letter detailing his voyage, Captain Foster wrote that the *Clotilde*, "fitted out for the coast of Africa to purchase a cargo of slaves, cleared and sailed from Mobile March 4th with the following cargo: 25 casks of rice, 80 casks of Augident Rum, 30 ffc Beef, 40 lbs. Pork, 3 bbls. sugar, 25 bbls. Flour, 4 bbl. Bread, 4 bbl Molasses, 25 boxes dry goods and sundries, 125 casks water and \$9,000 in gold: 9 men fore the mast, first and second mates, and myself made 12 in all on board."

Before the *Clotilde* arrived in Dahomey (now Benin), the *Tarkar tribe and village near the city of Tamale, Ghana had been raided by

**A library search resulted in no references to this tribe.*

Dahomey warriors and the survivors taken to Whydah for trade. The warriors included a group of women, presumably Amazons. The women warriors perpetrated the most awful butchery (Hurstons, 1927).

Captain Foster listed his arrival date at Whydah as May 15. When the *Clotilde* arrived, Foster was carried ashore. He later wrote "I met with an interpreter who kindly congratulated me. I spent the night in Merchants Exchange."¹ The next day, Foster was introduced to a prince. According to Foster, "having agreeably transacted affairs with the Prince, we went to the warehouse where they had in confinement four thousand captives in a state of nudity from which they gave me liberty to select one hundred and twenty five as mine, offering to brand them for me which I peremptorily forbid."² After receiving this human cargo and exchanging the gold and merchandise, the *Clotilde* crew sailed for Mobile. Captain Foster had to sail in haste, leaving fifteen of the Africans behind, because the African traders were trying to recapture the Africans they had sold. Foster's account reveals that 110 Africans had safely boarded the *Clotilde*. Other sources report the number as 116 and even as high as 160,³ although one would tend to assume that Foster's account is more accurate.

In Mobile, Foster got a steam tug to tow the schooner up the Spanish River into the Alabama River at Twelve Mile Island. As Foster stated, "I transferred my slaves to a river steamboat and sent them up into the canebrake to hide them until further disposal. I then burned my schooner to the water's edge and sunk her."⁴ The Africans were successfully hidden from customs agents and were later divided between the Meaher brothers and William Foster. Timothy Meaher retained thirty-two Africans; Burns Meaher was given ten; Jim Meaher was given about eight and William Foster received ten.⁵ The others were sold and sent to Selma, Alabama (Hurstons 1927). The Africans retained by the Meaher brothers and Foster, along with other Africans in the vicinity, founded the Africatown community. Here they patterned their lifestyles after those they had known in Africa, making only necessary adjustments to life in America. Mrs. Eva Jones, the daughter of Polee Allen (one of the initial African settlers) gives the year 1868 as the time the settlement was established.⁶

Settling near the Meaher place of residence at Magazine Point, the Africans preserved their customs and language and proved to be excellent farmers. They became a very industrious group and associated themselves with the Republican Party (Roche, 1914).

They developed an orderly community and took pride in its cleanliness. One observer, Mrs. Georgia Thames, reflected in 1982 that "every morning, the Africans would sweep the dirt that was the foundations of their yards." Today, their descendants continue to take great pride in maintaining the area.

Some Aspects of Folklife and Material Culture of Africatown

The Africatown settlers were made up of families who were proud and hardworking. It did not take long for them to adjust to the new and different challenges of day-to-day living. Unlike their homeland, their new environment did not possess an abundance of fruit trees, and their neighbors did not speak their native language. They were strangers in a strange place, but despite their astounding cultural differences, the Africans went about making do with what they found in their new homeland. With the objective of creating comfortable and self-sustaining lifestyles, the Africans went on to build a stable community, governing themselves and choosing their leaders to ensure their rights and responsibilities.

Zora Neale Hurston identified one physical characteristic that distinguished Africatown, or as the Africans called it "Africky Town," from other villages. That was the "eight gates around Cudjo Lewis' half-acre plot . . . built in memory of the Takkoi home from which he had been torn as a youth of eighteen." Cudjo was the last and most celebrated survivor of the original African settlers and became a spokesperson for the group. He died at age 105 according to 1935 articles in the *New York Times* and the *Mobile Press Register*.

Listed on the following page are the Africans living in Africatown who were enumerated in the 1880 census. The 1860, 1870, and 1900 censuses were also reviewed, but the 1880 census revealed more of the original African settlers. They were:

Ardassa Brunston
Allie Williams
Zuma Levinson
Cudjo Lewis
Celia Lewis
Polee Allen
Rose Allen
Orsa Keeby
Gena Keeby
Chamba Wigerfall
Peter Johnson
James Ellis

Lizzie Harmon
Anthony Thomas
Charles Lewis (Charlie)
Maggie Lewis
Lillie Nichol
Katy Cooper
Peter Lee
Josephine Lee
Samuel Johnson
J. B. Shade
C. Turner (Clara)
Louis Henderson

Religion

The African families and others in the area developed their community on solid religious foundations. Today, the church is still a strong pillar of the community, remaining a symbol of strength, unity, and hope for area residents. Initially, Sunday was just like any other day to the Africans, but later they learned the sacred meaning of the Sabbath day and became staunch Christians. Emma Langdon Roche reported that the Africans were in Alabama for ten years before they embraced Christianity.⁷

Soon afterwards, they built a church near the home of Cudjo Lewis. Before that time, the Africans attended a "little white Methodist Church in Toulminville."⁸ Years later, they began to attend the Stone Street Baptist Church. Having accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, they were baptized and united with the Stone Street Baptist Church under the leadership of Reverend Benjamin Burke, who was the pastor at that time. Often, the Africans held prayer meetings in different homes.

In 1872, the Africans established a sanctuary for themselves, calling it "The Old Baptist Church" and choosing Reverend Henry McGray as their pastor and leader. In 1903, they changed the name to Union Baptist Church and selected Reverend Watson as the first pastor. Other ministers who have led the Union Baptist Church include: Reverend Charlie Crawford; Reverend F. Keeby; Reverend W. D. Taylor; Reverend Monroe Hunter; Reverend H. H. Smith, who served

as pastor for over thirty-five years, and Reverend A. J. Crawford. In 1975, the church had 840 members. Today (1985), it has grown to over 1,000 members.

The original Union Baptist Church building has been replaced twice, rebuilt to accommodate the growth of the congregation. It has grown from the first small, white wooden structure adjoining the lot where Cudjo Lewis lived to the large brick sanctuary of today. Cudjo "would come out of his gate . . . there wasn't more than a drive between him and the church, to ring the bell." Ringing the church bell for services was Cudjo's task for many years, and he trained his grandchildren to ring it after he no longer could. "Whatever he could do, Motley (Mr. Motley Lewis (now deceased), the oldest grandson of Cudjo Lewis) and them could do it." Motley was born on January 12, 1895, to Aleck Lewis, Cudjo's son, and as a young boy read the Bible to Cudjo. Though Cudjo could not read or write, he was very intelligent and he could repeat many scriptures. As Motley recalled, "He was a man that had no chance to go to school, but his knowledge must have come through, as he said, 'from de Lord.'"



Established by the Africans as a sanctuary, the Union Baptist Church had many trees surrounding it. On the right, the gate to the entrance of the yard of Cudjo Lewis can be seen.



The first Union Baptist Church established by the African settlers. The sanctuary was used for both religious and social functions. This church faced east.



The second Union Baptist Church constructed by the Africans. Except for the windows, it was basically the same style as the first church and faced Green Avenue.

As Motley recalled, "I was fourteen years old and he'd call me to read the Bible to him. He would enjoy that. Psalms was his favorite book in the Bible. I would read on down to the first chapter, then second, third, fourth, and down to the fifth. There would be some words I couldn't pronounce. I would skip that and go on and he'd notice. He would say, 'You're skipping something there.' I'd turn and go back up to the top and go back to those words and when I'd get there again I would say, Oh, Grandpa, what is that? and he'd say, 'Why didn't you ask me that at first?'" Despite not being able to read, his sharp memory enabled him to make the corrections. Cudjo realized that some people did not believe there is a God, but he instilled in his grandson the concept that "God is the head man and he had a son named Jesus."

The Africans were proud of their church and they worked hard to keep it spotlessly clean. Cudjo was known as "the sexton of the church, a person designated to ring the church bell and open the church for meetings. It was also Cudjo's job to sweep the church for the services that were held every Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday night."⁹ The first church did not have electric lights, but used oil lamps. According to Mrs. Eva Jones, "every week Uncle Cudjo had a bench out there at the church. He would take all the lamps out there and set them on that bench. He'd wash the globes and fill the lamps and take them back in the church. Those lamps would be sparkling clean."¹⁰

Once a month, when they had communion, "all the Africans would send one or two of their children to the church and we'd scrub that church." As Mrs. Jones recalled, "I'd get down on my little knees with a bucket and somebody else's children, and we would scrub that church. Uncle Cudjo and his wife would fix them lamps and wash them benches off and have them beautiful. And we enjoyed it. Yes we did. It was beautiful."

In addition to the ministers mentioned earlier, Miss Viola Allen, the oldest living descendant of the African settlers, recalled some of the ministers of Union Baptist Church during her early age. They included her grandfather Polee Allen, Joyful Keeby, Charles Davis, Carter McCampbell, Elder McCree, and Elder West. "They weren't using the word Reverend then; they were using the word Elder." When the church got started, "they didn't transact all their business



Miss Viola Allen, the oldest living descendant of the Africatown settlers. Born on July 19, 1891, she is the granddaughter of Polee and Rose Allen, both Clotilde Africans.

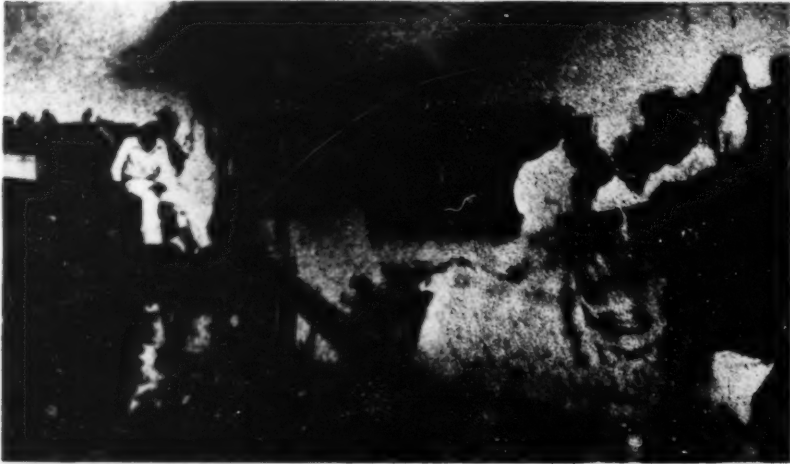
there. They could have the service there, but when it came to real business, it was a night when they went to Stone Street Church. They walked and they walked back regardless of the weather." This demonstrates the dedication of the Africans to maintaining their church.

The church was not only a place of worship, it was also used for social gatherings. Picnics were a favorite for the Africans and their families. As Miss Allen recalled, "when they built the church, they built a long shed. They had a long table. It had so much room, they could lock up some things. A family could pay \$1.20 regardless of its size and they could eat. The people in Mobile were thrilled to come to the picnics they gave up there." Mrs. Jones remembered when the Africans had their picnics. "If they were gonna have a picnic tomorrow, they'd get together tonight and go dig that pit and barbeque the cows, hogs, and goats. They'd start out there and barbeque that meat and they had a house built behind the church. They'd put all that stuff in there. The next day, all the ladies would go out there and serve the plates on the long table." This was a fun time for both the Africans and the visitors. The occasion allowed the Africans to work together to benefit their community.

Other churches were later established in Africatown. In 1884 the Yorktown Baptist Church was founded, and in 1901 the Hopewell Baptist Church was established. Another church is the Little Bethel Baptist Church. In 1926, Our Mother of Mercy Church was founded to serve the area's Catholics.

Before accommodations for baptisms were built in the churches, the baptisms for all churches were done in Three Mile Creek and near the Cochrane Bridge. Many area residents would attend the baptisms. It was a big occasion for the community to witness their neighbors and friends accepting Christ as their savior. It was a celebration in itself. Some baptisms were also done in a creek "down in the hardwood yard facing the East." Remembering the night she confessed religion at Union Baptist, Viola Allen recalled, "it came a time I couldn't hold my feet sturdy and I was wiggling on the bench and trying to hold my feet to the floor. And I began wondering how I was going to get out of there, because I wasn't going to get up. And when I knew anything, I was up! I was going up and down the aisle, and I was saying, 'Thank you, Jesus, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.' And when I found myself, I couldn't control myself no longer."

The religious principles the Africans held dearest were honesty, which was a tribal characteristic, and truthfulness. They instilled in their children the importance of these virtues. "We wasn't to lie and we wasn't to steal. They always give us to know lying and stealing was bad." The Africans were known throughout the area for their honesty and peacefulness, born out of their faith in God. This dedication is still prevalent in the community today.



Before church facilities were available, baptisms were held in local creeks.



Many spectators witnessed the baptisms of their family and friends.

Occupations

The Africans became wage earners to build their community and provide food, clothing and shelter for their families. Most of the men worked in the local lumber mills. The women became vendors of fruit and vegetables (Roche, 1914). In addition, they were cooks and laundresses, and they did other odd jobs to help make ends meet. Since agriculture was a way of life in their native land, they were excellent farmers. As Miss Allen recalled, "When the slaves were turned loose, they had to work to support themselves. When they turned them loose there, so many didn't want to go, but the ones they were under told them to plant and what they plant, sell it. Well, they went at that. They planted the vegetables and what they didn't plant, they would go out and buy from the bigger fields. But these things they planted, they would take them to town, and they would go to different houses. They sold all their greens, English peas, blackberries and figs." Potatoes and dewberries were also sold. Eva Jones recalls the Africans selling their goods three times a week, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. "They'd gather that stuff in the evening and fix them baskets. They had a big old cup, they called it a quart cup, where they would measure the figs and things in. They'd sell all that food." Both Miss Allen and Mrs. Jones remembered going with the Africans to sell their fruit and vegetables. They both loved it.

Some of the African women became outstanding cooks, providing meals for the workers in the mills. Notable among them were Zuma Levinson, Mary Allen, and Allie Williams. Cooking became a business for them since it proved to be a good source of income. Zuma was known to cook all of her life "and the white folks would just love to eat her cooking. She'd cook that food and she would take the big old baskets and put them on her head. She wasn't living far (on Bay Bridge Road) from where they work. And she'd take that basket of food down there (to the mills) and she would sell that food to them folks everyday." Her son also helped sell the food.

Mary Allen began her cooking by making pies and cakes. Her son Clarence would take the pies and cakes to the R. H. Benner Mill where he worked and sold them. Later, Mary Allen had a place at the mill where she prepared meals for the workers. She was Viola Allen's mother and the daughter of Polee and Rose Allen. Viola remembered



Zuma Levinson, one of the Clotide Africans, affectionately called "Grandma Zuma." She was a surrogate mother for Mary Allen after Rose Allen died (Photo circa 1905).



(Circa 1887-88) Back row, left to right, Julia Ellis, Kattie Allen, Mary Allen, Martin Levinson, and Rose Allen, holding Leonard Ellis. Front row, left to right, Mary Jane Levinson and Martha Allen (Rose Allen was one of the Clotilde Africans and the first wife of Polee Allen. Also shown are her children, grandchild and children of Zuma Levinson.)

her cooking "cornbread, peas and rice, or stew and rice, macaroni and a salad. She had a day for chicken, a fish day, and a day for gumbo. So many would want that gumbo and it was just wonderful. But there was something Mama didn't cook . . . Mama didn't cook lites and liver and no possum or nothing like that. She didn't cook no chittlings. Mama said she'd cook what she ate so when she didn't sell it, she could eat it. Mama didn't use anything but a rump roast. She would also get a whole pork loin. She had a saw to cut them. When she wanted to fry, she cut them and when she put it in the stove, she just cut that bone so when she throw the knife in, she would pick off and fix the different dishes."

Most of the men worked as laborers at the lumber mills, brickyards, and shipyards. Polee Allen stacked lumber at Blackshear Mill. His daughter recalled, "He worked from six to six. He'd come home and work in his garden, ...if he didn't work in his garden, he would be there building things in the yard for us." Orsa Keeby was a carpenter and fisherman. Cudjo Lewis, Sr., made his living making bricks and shingles. His grandson, Motley Lewis worked in Joe Kent's brickyard.

The census provides information on the occupations of the Africans and their neighbors during the early years of the settlement. Listed below are some occupations for this group found in the 1870, 1880, and 1900 census records.

1870, 1880, and 1900 Occupations of the Africans and their neighbors

1870	1880	1900
Turpentine laborer	Blacksmith	Mattress maker
Railroad laborer	Stevedore	Midwife
Servant (domestic)	Brickmaker	School teacher
Farm laborer	Cigar maker	Grocer
Minister	Porter	Painter
Cook	Wood cutter	Fruit dealer
Fisherman	Raftsmen	Brick mason
Cotton weigher	Seamstress	Longshoreman
Wash woman	Laundress	Machinist
Carpenter	Laborer	Timber hewer
Wood sawyer	Foundry worker	Laborer
Baker	Shingle maker	Restaurant waiter
Steamboatsman	Gardener	Butcher
Teamster	Press hand	Driver, ice wagon
Laborer	Hairdresser	Printer
Mechanic	Days' work	Wood dealer
Distiller	Servant (domestic)	Sailor
Sawmill worker	Barber	Fireman
Shoemaker	Caulker	Cotton sampler
Moss picker	Millwright	Contractor

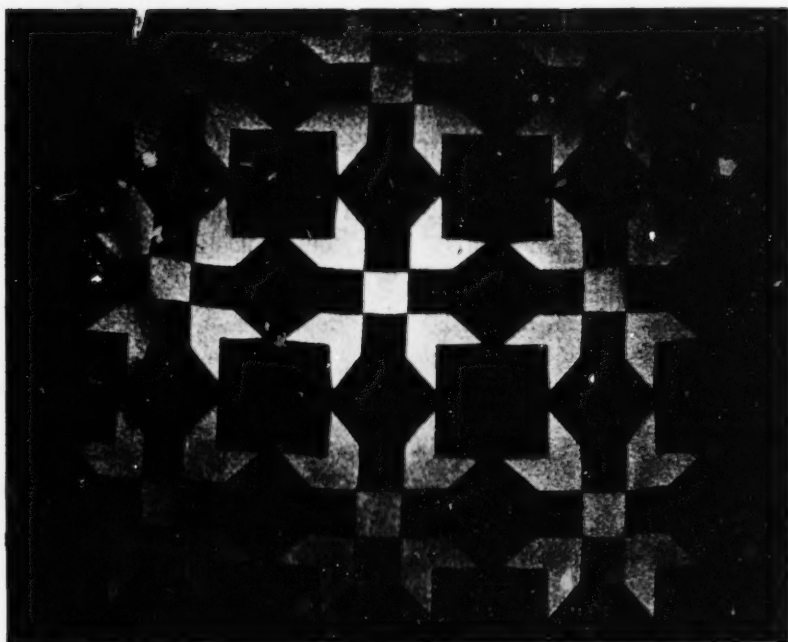
Arts and Crafts

The Africans were known as makers of many things, both functional and ornamental. Most of their work was done in wood and was often displayed in the construction of their homes. An abundance of timber in the area provided wood for the men to make boats, furniture, and toys for their children. These items included beds, chests for storing food and clothing, kitchen cabinets, swings, baskets, and other useful objects. Blacksmiths also provided important services and objects.

For women in the Africatown area, quilt-making became an art form. The quilts were used as bed coverings for warmth during winter months. Patterns varied in style and one of the favorites among



Chest made by Polee Allen and still used by his granddaughter, Viola Allen.



"David's Crown" quilt.

African women in Africatown was called "David's Crown," which is illustrated above on a quilt made by Mary Allen.

Remembering the swings her father used to make, Mrs. Jones recalled, "the swings were made of wood and iron. They would have iron bars on the top. They would bore holes through what they called two-by-fours. He would make a seat and it would have a floor in it. He would hang that swing and two of us could sit on one side and two of us on the other side. Even the babies could sit in the swing."

Baskets were fashioned from oak tree limbs. The limbs were cut into strips that were plaited and soaked in hot water. A variety of sizes were made and served many functions, including holding vegetables that were picked in the fields.

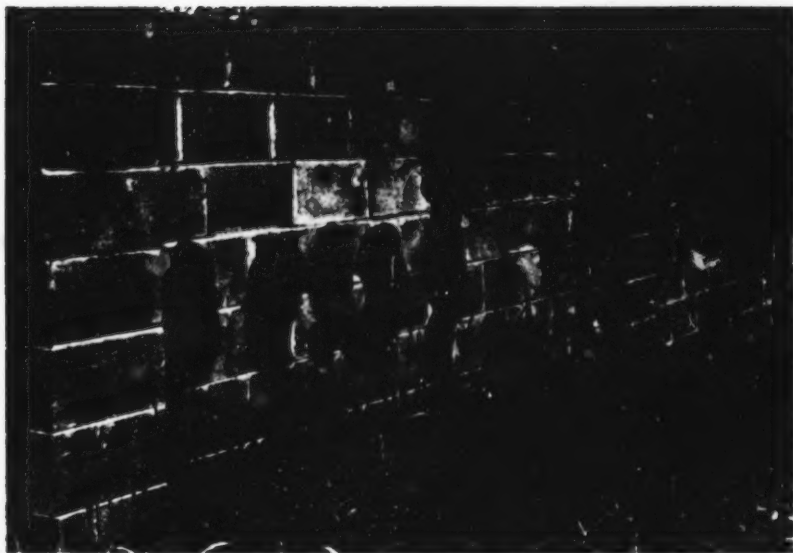
One of the most well-known contemporary craftsmen in the area today is Henry C. Williams, historian and trade educator. Williams learned the brick masonry trade and blacksmithing by working with the African masters in the area. In 1946, he established the first trade school in Mobile County, the Williams Industrial and Welding Trade School,

in a metal building constructed of 55-gallon steel drums. At the time, most engineers felt that ferrous metal buildings could not withstand the salt air from the Gulf Waters. Williams proved them wrong. He stated, "the steel building was visualized mainly because of economics." The steel drums were purchased from Standard Oil for ten cents apiece. He paid thirty dollars for 300 drums and hauled them away with a horse and wagon. The completion of the building in 1946 established the first Black-owned trade school in the Deep South. The building is now in dire need of reconstruction since it was heavily damaged in 1979 by Hurricane Frederic. However, it represents an innovative architectural style and construction method that proved to be cost effective as well as unique in its ability to be functional and sturdy.

Williams also constructed an unusual piece of art in the form of a 'Silhouette Fence.' It is composed of metal silhouettes of well-known Black and White Americans and some foreign dignitaries on a wall of concrete. The fence, located in Africatown, was constructed to represent a symbol for Black History by exhibiting individuals that had an impact or an influence on Black America. Along the length of this fascinating concrete and metal fence, silhouettes of the following people can be found.

Edward Carter
John Mingo
Ali Krussa
Don Antonio Mingo
Tiaao Totio
Debdra Garnett
Sojourner Truth
Phyllis Wheatley
Elizabeth G. Taylor
Crispus Attucks
Dred Scott
Mrs. H. Dred Scott
Harriet Tubman
John Brown
J. Copeland
Nat Turner
President U. S. Grant
Frederick Douglass
Elijah Lovejoy
President William McKinley
Colonel J. McKee
Bartis Poin de Sable

Hannibal Hamlin
Booker T. Washington
Dr. Dan H. Williams
Granvill T. Woods
George Washington Carver
Benjamin Banneker
Lewis Howard Latimer
Jan Matzlinger
Norbert Rilleux
Pierre Gazeave
E. T. Belsaw
B. P. Hamilton
Neente Guerrero
Mahatma Ghandi
John VI
P.B.S. Pinchback
Dr. Martin Luther King
John Kennedy
Robert Kennedy
Crusher
Ticker Toe Tim



Portion of Silhouette Fence constructed by Williams.

Folk Medicine

Throughout time, most areas have had regional "home remedies" used to cure maladies. Africatown is well known for its folk medicine. Though they were not often ill, the Africans sought relief from their illnesses by using home remedies. Herbs played an important role in the folk medicine practiced in Africatown and the Africans relied heavily on the wild plants that grew freely in the area. However, today most of the plants are becoming extinct, and many area residents feel that a large number of them have been destroyed by the acids and other pollutants from the nearby paper mill.

For the most part, traditional African drugs were herbal preparations. The roots, barks, leaves, branches, flowers, and seeds, along with less-frequently used mineral and animal products, were employed in remedies that are generations old (Pascal, 1977). This practice was continued in America. From generation to generation, the use of herbs for home remedies has been passed on to cure and prevent

certain ills. Along with herbal plants, castor oil and other oils have also been used as basic remedies.

Medical doctors were used only when an herbal remedy failed. Two doctors served the community during the early years: Dr. Wilkerson, a black man, and Dr. Henderson, a white man. They came to the residents with a horse and buggy. The doctors were used mostly to deliver babies and repair broken bones. Viola Allen feels that they were healthy and didn't need a doctor often because "everything was purer than what it is now."



Reverend Edward Williams, herbalist and longtime resident of Africatown, U.S.A.

One of the most renowned herbalists who lived among the Africans was Reverend Edward Williams. Born on September 15, 1886, in Creola, Alabama, Reverend Williams moved to Africatown in 1898 and served as its principal "herb doctor" until his death in February

1984. He said he "didn't have to worry about getting ready" to practice. It was something he had always been able to do. Calling it a gift from God, Reverend Williams cured many people of their ills. His clientele included community residents and people who came from various states. Most of his practice with medicinal plants remains a secret to everyone except his patients, his son (Henry C. Williams) and a few others. Henry Williams also learned some practices from the Africans.

Revealing some of his cures, Reverend Williams cited how he cooked poke salad and popgum elder to make what he called "blood medicine," which was used to cure gonorrhea, Pellagra, and consumption (tuberculosis). One woman in Africatown had been sick for seven months and no one was able to cure her. Finally, Reverend Williams met with her and cured her in seven weeks. He recalled, "in seven weeks I had her . . . What caused her to be down, I got it. Nobody couldn't get it but me."

The Africans used many plants to prevent or cure certain maladies. These plants included coondite, a cousin to the sweet potato that was eaten and sometimes steeped; and heart-leaves, which, when steeped, were used as a cold remedy and cologne because of their aromatic fragrance. They were also boiled and mixed with vaseline and used as hair pomade. They were so named because of their heart shape. Other medicinal plants were mistletoe, which could induce abortions, and the hibiscus, from which a tonic was made. People who took it regularly, particularly in the winter time, were reputed to have "lived to get 105 to 115 years old." Justifying its usage, Henry Williams lamented, "Many things I've said I don't even believe myself. But do you tell me that if a man lives to get 105 years old and did certain things and if I'm walking behind him you mean to tell me that I wouldn't pull up one root and chew it?" Broom sage was used to rid one of hay fever; rabbit tobacco, called "life everlasting" by those who knew it, was chewed as tobacco and smoked by some; chinaberries were eaten after the frost hit them; prickly ash was chewed daily to prevent toothaches and called the "toothache tree"; the headache plant was smoked to "drive out evil in the respiratory system"; red shank and bear foot were used to cure social diseases.

Other home remedies were used by the Africans to treat common illnesses. The Africans sought relief from the common cold by using

hog hooves. Sometimes they were boiled to make a tea and often the hog hooves were broiled in the oven until they became crisp. They would then be crushed and mixed with whiskey to make cough syrup. Honey and lemons were also used as a treatment for colds. Polee Allen was one of the Africans that raised bees to provide honey. It was mixed with plants such as heart-leaves and life everlasting and used often as a cold remedy. Elderberry leaves were used for sores. Some used ground alum for toothaches. Twice a year, a purgative made of bilious powder or calmers roots was taken. This was a method used to cleanse internal organs and rid the body of poisons in the system.

A mixture of asafetida, garlic, and whiskey mixed with a little water was also used to cleanse the intestines. Another herbal plant used for toothaches was red oak bark. It was boiled and, after cooling, held in the mouth as a pain killer. When children or adults had fever, "yellow top weed" was boiled and cooled and then used to bathe them. It was also used as tea.

Another remedy for the common cold was tallow from beef. It was cooked and made into a salve, then rubbed on the chest. Teas made of mint were also used for stomach aches. Babies were often given tea made of catnip. One plant, called "John the Conqueror," was thought to be the "luck roots." People carried it in their pockets for good luck.

Though medical doctors are used more frequently today, the Africatown residents still continue to rely heavily on folk remedies.

Music

Like most African music, the music in Africatown is chiefly vocal. Much of it is still provided by church choirs and local soloists. In the early years, one quartet grew out of one of the churches and became prominent throughout the South. The group, dubbed as the famous Union Star Singers, consisted of Oria Keeby, 1st tenor, James Joiner, 2nd tenor, Marcellus Giles, 1st bass, Nicholas Caffey, 2nd bass, and William Taylor, manager. They traveled extensively, performing spiritual concerts.

The instrument most used by the Africans was the harmonica. One man in the community, a Mr. Scott, used to sit on his porch and play an accordion. The informant could not recall the first name of Mr. Scott. Some people in the neighborhood also played bass fiddles. It was reported that an area resident played a bass fiddle at Yorktown Baptist Church. Other prevalent musical instruments were pianos and organs. However, singing was the dominant musical expression. It has been said by Fisher that Africans brought their cultural trait of using songs for historical records and satirical purposes to the United States.¹¹ This trait could have been a factor in singing becoming the basic form of music in the community as well as in other African-American settlements in the United States.

Folktales

Capturing the lore of Africatown, Emma Langdon Roche wrote of tales and beliefs of the area in her book, *Historical Sketches of the South*, published in 1914. Of the Africatown lore, Roche recalled that "much has been told and written by casual visitors of the queer rites and superstition of Africatown." One such story was that "treasure buried by early adventurers, pirates, and in later times by members of the Copeland Gang" could be found in the area. A tale that Magazine Point ghosts existed also circulated. Tales of river bandits were also told in the area and it was reported that pirates stole gold from some local graves. The grave of William Foster, captain of the *Clotilde*, was reported to have been robbed of the gold sword and other gold items it contained. A visit to his burial site revealed a hole in the concrete slab covering his grave.

One tale from the area involves Cudjo Lewis. This version was told by Henry C. Williams. "Ole Cudjo Lewis grew many beautiful trees in his yard . . . trees that bore many delicious fruits. For several weeks, Cudjo observed a man sneak over the fence in his yard and pick fruit from the trees and then sneak back over the fence thinking he had not been detected. Cudjo watched him do this for many weeks, until one day he decided to make an impression on the man. He took out his muzzle-loader. Instead of filling it with shot he filled it with black-eyed peas and grains of corn and packed it with a handful of powder and some scraps of paper to create a bang. Cudjo watched the man

again pick fruit from the trees, and when he was about to climb over the fence, leveled the muzzle-loader filled with peas, corn, powder, and paper and let go. The man fell over the fence. He knew he was dead! Later, feeling that his pride was injured, the man decided to have Uncle Cudjo arrested. Cudjo was taken before the judge who asked him, "Did you shoot him in defense?" To which Cudjo replied, "Oh, no, your honor; I shotted he in de seat of de pants."

The author was able to find one documented tale, collected by Arthur Fauset, from Cudjo in August 1925. Cudjo was a great storyteller and people, black and white, would come to hear his tales. Though parables that he told can be found in materials by Roche (1914) and Hurston (1927), this tale is of major significance because it appears to be the only documented folktale related by Cudjo. The tale appears in two books, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), and is entitled T'appin (Terrapin).

More time and research is needed to document these stories so they can be passed on to future generations. As Richard Dorson pointed out, "Storytelling plays a daily role in Negro culture as a source of entertainment and channel of belief." The preservation of this segment of folk culture is necessary to aid in understanding the wide spectrum of culture in the area. Pointing out the importance of recording such tales and beliefs, Enid Porter aptly stated that "up and down the county are still many old and elderly whose memories should be recorded before it is too late, for with the deaths of such people a bit of folklore dies too and our knowledge of tradition and custom is the poorer."¹²

Architecture

Today, building is a skill left to professionals such as architects, building contractors, construction workers, engineers, and developers. During Africatown's early years, most building was done by the male heads of households, along with friends in the area. According to Reverend Williams, "most of them had no trade or nothing they studied. They just picked up the tree and worked the tree so they could put up a house." Only a few carpenters in the area were responsible for some of the construction.

Houses built in America by the Africans differed from the clay homes of their native land. Their building techniques were influenced greatly by Western methods. In America, the clay gave way to wood, and windowless walls were replaced by walls with windows and wooden shutters. None of the original African homes now exist, although several late 19th to early 20th century houses are located in the area. The second house of Polee Allen is the only extant house of any of the Clotilde Africans. It has been remodeled three times, with only the living room remaining unchanged, but the original frame and foundation are present.

Most of the houses in the area are of two types, the shotgun and the bungalow. Contrary to popular belief, the Clotilde Africans did not live in shotgun houses; most of these structures were occupied by other families who worked in the nearby mills.



Shotgun houses were prevalent in Africatown.

The sites of the original houses of the Africans are now open spaces or have been built upon. One open lot, the home site of Peter Lee, has only the remains of a chimney. Most of the Africans were reported to have "wide houses, usually with two front doors." There was a substantial difference in size between these and the narrow shotgun houses. Some say the "wide houses" built in the area were nothing more than two shotgun houses put together. This might be a valid



A "wide house" in Africatown.

observation, because the floor plans of each side of the wide houses closely resembled the floor plan of a single shotgun house. A "wide house" is considered to be one that is generally about 32 ft. in width.

Most of the Africatown shotgun houses had three-rooms, "two bedrooms and a kitchen." Some had a side door, usually leading to the kitchen, which was a third entrance. It was customary for visitors to come to this side door, particularly if both the first and second rooms were used for bedrooms. In some instances, the first room was used as a living room. No hallways were constructed, and one common problem was the lack of built-in closet space. It was common to see nails on the walls to hang clothes.

Some of the wooden frame houses in Africatown have now been covered with brick or aluminum siding. Pine, cypress, and oak were most often used for construction.

Viola Allen, who lived in a shotgun house prior to 1910, reported that most of them were 12 ft. to 15 ft. wide. The average "wide house" was 30 ft. to 32 ft. wide and 40 ft. to 50 ft. long.

Cudjo Lewis' house was described by Emma Langdon Roche as being "substantially built with two rooms opening on a gallery which extends across the front length, with two smaller rooms at the rear. There were no glass windows—only wooden shutters." Cudjo built his



Remains of chimney from house of Peter Lee—one of the original Africatown settlers. Red clay bluffs are still found in portions of the community.

impact. Of all the houses in Africatown, the Mobile Historic Development Commission identified only twenty-four as being architecturally significant, though many more actually exist.

Though they are not the high styled classics of architecture usually nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, the houses in Africatown are components of the total character of the area. They should be restored and preserved as monuments to the unsung craftsmen who erected them. Support must now be garnered from local preservation and community development agencies to fund restoration and preservation projects in Africatown so these houses can be saved. There is a disparity in the allocation of funds by local, state, and federal agencies for preservation projects in African-American communities, due primarily to the lack of recognition given these areas by local officials.

Preservation and Planning Efforts

Early preservation efforts, stimulated by recognition of the historical significance and cultural values of Africatown, began with the founding of the Progressive League in 1957. Under the leadership of Henry C. Williams, this grassroots organization was formed to protect and promote cultural and historical values in the community.

The Progressive League began to research available material about the Africans to signify the importance of Africatown as a area that represents an historic resource for African-Americans. In 1959, two years after its inception, the League erected a monument as a symbol to the Africans. A bust of Cudjo Lewis was chosen because "Uncle Cudjo Kazoola Lewis lived the longest and it is our feeling that he is the symbol of all the African natives." The monument is located in front of the Union Baptist Church on Bay Bridge Road. According to Williams, the monument of Cudjo Lewis on the Old Spanish Trail is the "only Black man in total America on an international trail facing a highway that is open where all people pass. Cudjo is facing east because he always wanted to go back to Africa."

In 1978, the American Ethnic Science Society joined the Progressive League in its attempt to gain national recognition for Africatown and protect the community's cultural resources. The American Ethnic Science Society was designated as the research arm for the Africatown Preservation Project. The first phase of this project involved completion of a survey and inventory of cultural and historic properties in the area. Over fifty-two properties were identified, of which twenty-six met National Register criteria. In July, 1981, the formal nomination of Africatown as a National Historic District was forwarded to the State Historic Preservation Officer for certification. The 1981 nomination marked the highlight of the Africatown preservation movement. However, to date the nomination has not been forwarded to the Department of the Interior, despite being one of the most detailed nominations prepared in Alabama. The reluctance of the State Preservation Officer to certify the nomination cannot be fully understood, since the intensive research and adherence to National Register guidelines cannot be disputed.

Growing national and international support for Africatown has surfaced among professional and political groups that have recognized its historic and cultural value. Many African dignitaries have visited the area to demonstrate their support for the proposed historic district. A bill was introduced in the 98th Congress to have Africatown declared an historic district, but passage attempts were unsuccessful. Finally, the Alabama legislature passed a bill in September 1985 that officially recognized Africatown as an historic area and made provisions for the establishment of an Africatown Historic State Park.

Conclusion

Africatown is ripe with preservation opportunities. It represents a cultural landscape that should be preserved for posterity. The cultural heritage embodied in the community symbolizes the aspirations of its founders. Their tenacity in building a strong, viable community, embellished with deep religious principles, can continue through the preservation medium of a National/International Historic District. Africatown has the potential of boosting the local economy, while serving as a cultural and historical mecca for African-Americans and the world. The Progressive League has demonstrated that the area is worthy of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Those state and national officials charged with protecting and enhancing cultural resources should act quickly to facilitate National Register listing so that the area can receive economic benefits to aid in its development. The tax incentives afforded residents in historic districts are sorely needed by Africatown residents to aid in improving community appearance. The funding and technical assistance available to places on the National Register would help provide the impetus needed to make Africatown's future potential become a reality.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Foster, "Last Slaver from U.S. to Africa," 1890, Handwritten letter in the Mobile Genealogy Library in Mobile, Alabama.
2. *Ibid.*
3. "Necrological," *Mobile Press*, March, 1890.
4. William Foster, "Last Slaver from U.S. to Africa," 1890, Handwritten letter in the Mobile Genealogy Library in Mobile, Alabama.
5. Zora Neale Hurston, "Cudjo's Own Story of the Last African Slaver," *Journal of Negro History* (October, 1927): 648-663.
6. Eva Allen Jones, "History of the Union Baptist Church," undated.
7. Emma Langdon Roche, "Last Survivor of Slave Ship Deeply Grateful to God, Man" *Mobile Press Register*, August 18, 1935.
8. Eva Allen Jones, "History of Union Baptist Church, undated.
9. Eva Allen Jones, tape recorded interview, Africatown, Alabama, January 4, 1982.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, Chicago: American Historical Association, 1953.
12. Enid Porter, *Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore*, London: Roughledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

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Cudjo Lewis, one of the Clotilde Africans, sitting in his house. Photo circa 1920.

own house and lived in it for 75 years. According to his grandson, Motley Lewis, "it was a log house made out of logs he cut to fit all around the house. It had mortar made out of sand and lime that was put in the cracks . . . no wind or nothing could go in." The roof was covered with shingles that Cudjo himself made. A 1920 photograph of Cudjo Lewis inside his house shows the use of newspaper on the walls, probably used for additional insulation. The photograph shows a bundle of sticks on a shelf that local historian Henry Williams said was used as a calendar.

Many houses in Africatown were heavily damaged by Hurricane Frederic when it hit the Gulf Coast in September 1979. Most have since been repaired but others remain abandoned or in a state of disrepair. The Mobile Historic Development Commission recommended the demolition of a large percentage of these houses after an architectural survey of the area in 1981. It is unfortunate that the survey occurred after the hurricane rather than before its devastating